

Where is the Love? How Parenting Magazines Discuss the “Mommy Wars” and why it Matters.

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Abstract: In June 1990, *Newsweek* coined the term “mommy wars” to describe the cultural tug-of-war between women who work outside the home and women who stay home to care for children. Historical and contemporary literature on feminism, women in the workplace, women in the home and motherhood, suggest the “mommy wars” are more than just a bitter disagreement between two groups of mothers. This paper argues both working and stay-at-home mothers are frustrated with the antiquated corporate and societal ideals of women and motherhood. A critical discourse analysis method was used to analyze the content of *Parents* magazine from 1990 to 2006. The sample included 54 articles focusing on working mothers, stay-at-home mothers, the “mommy wars,” or the larger social issues present in each discussion. The sample was analyzed for recurrent themes and discussion of the social issues regarding each theme. Of the 54 articles analyzed, four were found to directly address the “mommy wars,” and no recurrent themes were present. Three prevalent themes were found regarding discussion of working mothers, and four themes were present in discussion of stay-at-home mothers. Discussion of social and corporate issues was largely absent.

1. Introduction

Since it’s coining in 1990, the term “mommy wars” has become a part of the American vernacular. Used to describe the social and cultural tug-of-war between women who work for pay and women who stay home to care for children, the “mommy wars” has been the topic of countless newspaper and magazine articles, and television shows. Maureen Dowd, a popular New York Times columnist, has written on the subject several times and both Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil have dedicated episodes to the ‘mommy wars,’ with Dr. Phil literally pitting working-mothers and at-home mothers against each other by seating them on opposite sides of the studio. Additionally, dozens of books and mainstream magazine articles have been published on the topic most of which use the testimony of real mothers to demonstrate how the two sides clash when it comes to what is best for themselves, their families and their children. This suggests that the “Mommy wars” are indeed a real phenomenon, and not just a construction of the media.

However, little formal research has been conducted to determine the role of the media, specifically parenting magazines, in this discourse.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to analyze *Parents* magazine from 1990 to 2006. CDA, according to Wood & Kroger (2000) [1], is an emphasis on understanding discourse in relation to social problems and social structural variables such as race, gender, class and power. A second definition, provided by Phillips and Jorgenson (2002) [2] defines CDA as an explanatory critique that aims to identify an unmet need or misrepresentation between reality and the view of reality that functions ideologically.

Parents magazine was chosen as the text for analysis because it has the largest rate-base, or advertiser quoted distribution, of any parenting magazine on the market. Each issue of the magazine was analyzed for articles specifically addressing the “mommy wars,” working mothers, at-home mothers, or any socio-cultural issues related to discourse surrounding the “mommy wars,” including child care, opting-out of the workforce and workplace inflexibility. A total of 54 relevant articles were identified in the 16-year period. A baseline content analysis found four articles directly addressed the “mommy wars,” 29 articles addressed the concerns of working mothers, seven addressed stay-at-home mothers and the remaining 14 articles fell into the category of other.

With regard to the “mommy wars” specifically, only four articles were found to directly address the issue. Three were surveys conducted in 1990 and 1996, while the fourth was a commentary written by a stay-at-home mother. These surveys did attempt to flush out the social issues at play in the “mommy wars,” such as the

America idealization of the 1950's nuclear family, and provided women a forum to justify their choice to work or stay home.

Three predominant themes were identified with regard to working mothers. The first is corporate inflexibility. In articles addressing the concerns of working mothers, a majority discussed the lack of flexibility in the workplace that make working and being a parent challenging. However, there were no suggestions as to how positive change could be enacted to make workplaces more family friendly. The second theme present in the discussion of working mothers is guilt. Working mothers, as depicted in the articles, are extremely guilt ridden. The guilt typically comes from two sources; internal and external. Internal guilt comes from the emotional stress a mother feels when she is not present for important events in her kids' lives. External guilt comes from sources outside the mother, such as other parents, demanding employers or the media. However, this theme of guilt is underwritten by the idea that working mothers should feel guilty, because if they do not feel bad about missing a soccer game or ballet recital, they are bad mothers. A final predominant theme in the discussion of working mothers, is not working. More than a dozen articles addressed how working mothers could afford to quit their jobs or work part-time. Many of them outlined how expensive working is when adjusted for the cost of childcare, clothes, transportation, lunches and other expenses. The underlying assumption is that working mothers do not want to be working. These articles reinforced not only the idea that women should be in the home with children, but that if a woman enjoys her dual role, she fits the stereotype of a selfish-materialistic woman who is unconcerned with her children.

Four themes were found with regard to stay-at-home mothers. The first is working as a choice. Stay-at-home mothers often referred to the devaluing of parenting and housework as actual work. Many also reinforced that they chose not to work, presumably in an attempt to combat any suggestions that they are incapable of earning and income due to lack of training or education. The second theme was self-sacrifice. At-home mothers consistently talked about the material comforts they gave up in order to afford to stay home with their children. These comments, however, were nearly always followed by a reinforcement of the choice to stay home -- "it's worth not have a new car or eating out three or four times a week to be able to stay home with my kids." At-home mothers were also associated with a loss of identity. Many commented they felt invisible, lonely, isolated or depressed after quitting work. Articles addressing this issue always provided suggestions for combating these feelings, encouraging mothers to join playgroups, volunteer or become active in the community. But, some at-home mothers said it was the social stigma of being a "housewife" that was the hardest to overcome. A final theme associated with at-home mothers is a shift in marital equality resulting from the lack of a second income. Women found themselves resenting receiving an "allowance" from their husbands, or being questioned about their spending habits. The magazine's response to this was suggestions about budgeting and finding fun yet inexpensive things to do as a couple, which does not address the real issue of economic dependency and the potential consequences of a woman's loss of income in both the short and long term.

Addressing the larger themes present in parenting magazines' discussion of working and at-home mothers is important and relevant for two main reasons. First, because they are so widely read, parenting magazines should have a responsibility to inform and educate readers about the issues that affect them. Instead of an honest discussion about the pros and cons of each choice, these publications largely skirt the issues all together, and when one is addressed, it is sugar coated and reframed to fit the target audience of the article. Second, these magazines frequently take stances on issues like breast or bottle feeding, and co-sleeping, yet refuse to take a stance on the issue of affordable quality childcare, paid maternity and paternity leave, corporate flexibility, reasonable leave policies and fair wages for part-time work. If this genre of publication took a strong editorial stance in favor of these policies, and got their advertisers to do the same, a major social shift could occur. Yet these magazines are eerily silent about so many of the issues that really affect both working at stay-at-home mothers the most.

3. Conclusions

Parenting magazines' discourse about the "mommy wars" is generally unproductive, doing little more than regurgitating the arguments of both working and at-home mothers. Little discussion of larger social issues is present and suggestions for change are rarely present.

4. Acknowledgements

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[1] Wood, L. A., & Kroger, R. O. (2000). *Doing discourse analysis: methods for studying action in talk and text*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

[2] Jorgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2002). *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications